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CONTINUANCE

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A few years ago I found myself leaning against a wrought iron gate adjacent to a popular-lined boulevard, watching poeple in the morning rush. Men were motioning to each other in their conversations as they sauntered down the street, women with tightly clutched handbags had a quicker pace, and children in red neckerchiefs shoved and tugged each other as they laughed. Then a new flurry filled the scene with the next gust of wind; the boulevard was filled with what at first looked like snow, but on a balmy May afternoon? As the soft, down-like fleece settled, it covered the street, sidewalks, even me, as the morning hustle and bustle was softened. I soon realized that this snow was actually seedlings, like those from dandelions. Later that evening my uncle told me that what I had seen was called "puhli" in Russian. When I returned to the States, I searched for the English word, but I always forget it. For me the experience of that day will always simply be "puhli", and no word can replace it.

All of you have experiences gleaned from the past four years. They range from scaling foreign walls to climbing the tower; from meetings in the Rath to trysts in desolate train stations; from chilly, misty mornings at Ground Hog Park to sun-baked days amidst the hills of Olympia. And like the Norse legend of the "Veralder Nagli", the world spike hammered into the center of the universe, the Pole Star, this university has been the center of your education, your experiences from which you have gained your bearings. The memories, the experiences of your education can be likened to constellations in the sky; each of you see the same sky but different patterns. The wholeness of your liberal arts education has not dis-integrated the sky-scape, not reduced it to obscure dots of light, but has connected the experiences and led you to what it means. In the words of Rilke,

"And you wait, awaiting the one
to make your small life grow:
the mighty, the uncommon,
the awakening of stone,
the depths to be opened below.

Now duskily in the bookcase
gleams the volumes in brown and gold;
you remember lands you have wandered through,
the pictures and the garments
of women lost of old.

And you suddenly know: It was here!
You pull yourself together, and there
stands an irrevocable year
of anguish and vision and prayer." (Memory)

Again the memories, like the sky above, form an abode to which you can retreat to escape the hectic life which you have built on earth. You stand as the masters of these stars, able to create some of them, but always being able to capture any of them for yourselves. But what of the present? What of the continuing expansion of your horizons? I don't know about you, but I feel the cruelest nostalgia, not for the past but nostalgia for the present. I yearn to experience the presence, the excitement of everyday. We all yearn to partake in the present. For when time has relentlessly flowed over the present and changed it into the past, only the interaction with that present remains.

Each of you is urged to interact with the present, not simply to be a character in a story, but to write the lines, not only to be in the picture, but to paint it. The difference is like that between driving a car through the countryside and walking or jogging through the countryside. In the car, the landscape is framed by the windows of the car and you sit willy-nilly as bystanders, observing the changing scenes, but only that, not participating in them. You are "in here," in the car, while the world, all the action, is "out there".

In jogging I find myself in an entirely different situation. In the stillness of the predawn hours, I alone have the mirror-like lake, the smell of fresh-baked bread, squirrels darting about, and the quarrelsome cackling of geese. If the landscape seems more alive, it's because it has come alive. I lose myself in this landscape as well as in thought, yet I am also aware of myself, my rhythmic breathing, muscles straining. And I become more aware of the world about me. So in this paradoxical situation in which I no longer sit back and observe, but interact, become part of the landscape (but never, hopefully, part of the furniture) I lose myself but yet I find myself.

Similarly, we often become passive observers, concentrating on the interpretation of the story, rather than being engaged in the story. As a recent top-ten song comments, "there are too many dancers and not enough songs." We fail to experience all that we can each day; it is easier to be complacent, to sit back put our feet up, and watch the world pass by. As Rosalind Russell cried out in "Auntie Mame", "Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving." At times our substance and spirit grow frail and thin from non-participation.

"The vital act" in quantum theory, as John Wheeler emphasizes, "is the act of participation." In this physics we are asked to abandon the concept of scientific objectivity which rests upon the assumption of an external world which is "out there" as opposed to an "I" which is "in here". And in our studies of the subatomic realm, from quarks to leptons, protons to pions, we find that we cannot eliminate ourselves from the picture. We are a part of Nature, and when we study Nature there is no way around the fact that Nature is studying itself. As Heisenberg wrote: "What we observe is not Nature itself, but Nature exposed to our method of questioning." As a consequence of quantum theory, an experimenter only observes what he chooses to measure. It is the very act of measurement, of interaction, which determines the outcome of the experiment. The insights to be gained depend upon the questions which we ask.

Complementing quantum theory, relativity theory has taught me the inter-penetration of space and time: there is no space without time, no time without space. As Minkowski stated: "All of the past and all of the future, for each individual, meet and meet forever, at one single point, now. The now of each individual is specifically located, and will never be found in any other place than here..." My nostalgia for the present grows.

What I am asking of each of you is "carpe diem," to seize the day, (to have a zest for life), to live each day, and to continue to grow. You are called to ask your own questions, to say all that you have to say, and to accept the responsibility for your life and for a part of society. Again in the words of Rilke: "You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be

given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

We at the University have tried to open up new experiences in the process of your education. We have created the atmosphere for a liberating education, one which has set you free to explore the realm of human experience. Now this task is taken upon yourselves. Future explorations must be launched entirely on your accord and I urge you to continue to question, to be curious, to marvel, and to experience life in every way you can. And in your searching, be not prejudiced in your choice of experiences; be open. Do everything with the enthusiasm of doing it for the first time. Perhaps the following story illustrates this point:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1866-1912) one day received a university professor, who came to enquire about Zen. As a gracious host, Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitors's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. "It is overfull; no more will go in," he cried. "Like this cup", Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

So how are you to know when you have chosen questions and paths which avoid the egoism of the self? Everything appears so contradictory at first sight. You are asked to become one of the participants, to ask your own questions, to lose yourself in the picture, in the story, and in this way you will find yourself. It all sounds confusing, just like an advanced physics course. A guideline to the paths is offered by Carlos Castaneda in The Teachings of Don Juan,

"Any path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you... Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question... Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't it is of no use."

And when you know, you will feel it throughout your very being -- in the feel of the words as they pass through your mind and in the power they have to change your life. There is a resonance that was not there before. The resonance swells within until it rocks the foundations of your being. You will literally feel good, live well, and enjoy life.

This afternoon I have tried to speak about and from experience, about knowledge from my own knowledge. In this special time of ending and beginning, I have tried to speak from the heart after having searched my soul for words to leave with you. As you continue living, may you never abandon educating yourself; for one who has stopped learning, experiencing, is no longer living although he may be alive. The task and the responsibility is difficult and the temptations to become a passive observer are sometimes overwhelming. Again alluding to jogging, it is in the last mile that we entertain thoughts of stopping short, of slowing down, of cheating ourselves. We pray and we persevere, and you know, it is completing the last mile which brings the greatest personal satisfaction, everyday.

As one last gesture I along with members of the faculty and staff, wish to thank you for the friendships with you which have grown over the past years. At this time of openness I can reveal that we have taken pride in your achievements and in your becoming. Although much like fathers, we beam inside with pride and satisfaction, but seldom say so in words. But sometimes, if you pay particular attention, you can see it in the boastful smile and gaze of a departmental chairman. In addition to your friendship, we've been fathers and mothers, aunts and uncles, witnesses to your lives, and for some of you to your children. In you rests our hope. We believe in what Daniel Webster stated:

"If we work marble, it will perish; if we work upon brass, time will efface it; if we rear temples, they will crumble; but if we work upon immortal minds and instill into them just principles, we are then engraving upon tablets which no time will efface, but will brighten and brighten to all eternity."

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you at this special time and may you live all the days of your lives.

Richard P. Olenick
Senior Convocation
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